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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 003483

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2017
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SUBJECT: RULING PARTY HEAD ON IRI AND POLITICAL PARTIES

REF: CAIRO 3420

Classified By: Ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a December 11 meeting, Safwat El Sherif (secretary-general of the ruling National Democratic Party and speaker of the Shura Council, Egypt's upper parliamentary house) qualified his previous public criticism (reftel) of the International Republican Institute's (IRI) activities in Egypt. Sherif is irritated that IRI has been directly recruiting lower-echelon NDP members for off-shore training courses in Morocco and Jordan, without seeking input from or approval of NDP participants from NDP headquarters. Sherif is mulling over an Iraqi request for Egyptian training in political party work. He denied reports that parliament will take up a new NGO law during the current session. End summary.

¶2. (C) Noting that he has no problem with the actual substance of IRI's training - "it is normal material" - Sherif expressed reservations about the quality of the NDP cadres that IRI is recruiting, and was irritated that IRI is not seeking input from or getting approval of NDP participants from NDP headquarters. Musing about the do's and don'ts of being a foreign institute working in the political sphere in Egypt, Sherif reflected on the positive experiences of German organizations operating in Egypt since the 1980's - the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Sherif himself had enjoyed a two-month seminar in political and media affairs in Germany in the 1980's. He said that the German NGO's had "partnered" with the appropriate Egyptian organizations, which had allowed them to understand what Egyptian desires were, rather than "imposing" their particular agendas. "In order to engage successfully, you must understand the mentality of the country. IRI, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) - do they truly understand the situation in Egypt?"

¶3. (C) The Ambassador, commenting that it is regrettable that the GOE still has not registered IRI, NDI and IFES, highlighted that all of the institutes want to engage in activities that Egyptians themselves want, and hope to be helpful in encouraging political party life in Egypt. The Ambassador noted that IFES has been working cooperatively with both the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, and Cairo University's Faculty of Economic and Political Sciences. He asked if another appropriate partner for IFES might be the Supreme Electoral Committee. Sherif reflected for a moment, and replied, "Let me think about it."

¶4. (C) Returning to IRI, Sherif acknowledged that the offshore training offered by IRI is "just like the training we do at the NDP's training institute." He described a major training effort underway prior to the early April local

council elections, in which NDP cadres are being schooled in skills such as public speaking and "drawing the political, social, and economic map of an area, and determining how we can best utilize that information in our election campaigns."

He said that the visiting Iraqi minister of justice and a delegation of Iraqi parliamentarians has asked the NDP to cooperate with Iraqi political parties, and perhaps even offer such training to them. Sherif said he was considering the request, but would not act on it prior to the local council elections (likely to be on either April 7 or 8), as "that effort is consuming all of my attention."

15. (C) Asserting that the NDP has "changed completely" over the past few years "in terms of both our ideas and our numbers," Sherif flagged that sixty-five percent of NDP members are now between the ages of 18-40. He noted that the NDP's total nationwide membership is 2.5 million. "Opposition parties complain, but in the end, who has changed - it is the NDP! We have undertaken obvious practices of democracy, such as electing the president of our party at the recent party conference." Emphasizing that "the NDP is strong and effective," Sherif bemoaned the weak state of opposition political parties, placing the blame squarely on oppositionists themselves, for their divisive internal politics and leadership squabbles. "Weak opposition parties are the roadblock to building greater democracy Weak opposition parties are the reason that there are 88 Muslim Brotherhood members of parliament." Sherif did not respond to the Ambassador's querying as to how to change this unfortunate dynamic.

16. (C) In response to a question from the Ambassador, Sherif flatly stated that parliament would not consider a new NGO law during the current session (which will end in June/July).

CAIRO 00003483 002 OF 002

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